

Chief Robert Henry Clarence: the last hereditary chief of the Mosquito Reservation

AlterNative
2024, Vol. 20(4) 649–657
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DOI: 10.1177/11771801241263601
journals.sagepub.com/home/aln



Luciano Baracco 

Abstract

This article presents a biography of Chief Robert Henry Clarence, the last Hereditary Chief of the Mosquito Reservation—a historical territory formerly located on Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast. In 1894, the reservation was militarily incorporated into Nicaragua. The following account shines a light on the Mosquito (the largest Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America’s Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica—who have been referred to as the Miskitu since the mid-20th century) perspective of the incorporation. This article draws on Foreign Office files (1894–1907) held by the National Archives in London, which contain correspondence from Chief Clarence and other Mosquito leaders. By focusing on a figure who has been obscured in the historiography on the reservation, the evidence produces a narrative of Mosquito political consciousness which contrasts with the disparaging depictions contained in British and North America diplomatic correspondence.

Keywords

Chief Robert Henry Clarence, incorporation, Mosquito Reservation, Nicaragua

Introduction

Robert Henry Clarence was born in 1872 in Pearl City (Oertzen et al., 1990), in the Mosquito Reservation, in what is now the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, where Indigenous communities of Mosquito (the largest Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America’s Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica—who have been referred to as the Miskitu since the mid-20th century), Mayangna (an Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia; formerly known as Sumos), Rama (the smallest Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia), and Garifuna (an Afro-Indigenous group with origins on the island of St. Lucia) peoples continue to live. In 1891, at the age of 19, Robert Henry Clarence was elected Hereditary Chief of the Mosquito Indians and, *ex officio*, president of the Mosquito Reservation (Taylor, 1891). Three years later, he was forced into exile by Nicaraguan troops who occupied the city of Bluefields, and annexed the reservation.

An extensive academic literature exists on the Mosquitia and the patterns of leadership which characterized the Kingdom of Mosquitia (1687–1860) and the Mosquito Reservation (1860–1894); two political entities which maintained the territory’s autonomy throughout the colonial and early republican eras (Helms, 1986; Mendiola, 2019; Olien, 1983; Williams, 2013). The present article seeks to add to this literature by examining the life of the last Hereditary Chief, Robert Henry Clarence. Few accounts have taken an interest in the actions of Chief Clarence

during the occupation of Bluefields, or his subsequent diplomatic efforts to restore the reservation during his exile in Jamaica. The marginalization of Chief Clarence reflects a wider tendency for the Mosquito to be eclipsed by a far greater focus on imperial and neocolonial actors in the historiography of the reservation era. This article represents a tentative attempt to re-inscribe the Mosquito into that historiography as political protagonists in a struggle to restore their centuries old autonomy.

While documentary evidence about Chief Clarence remains relatively scarce, there nonetheless exists enough to produce a political and personal biography. The main source of evidence which this article draws on is a series of letters, notes, and petitions written by Chief Clarence contained in Foreign Office (FO) files held by the National Archives in London. While a number of studies on the Mosquitia have drawn on FO files (Dziennik, 2018; Healy, 1981), they have tended to focus on the diplomatic correspondence between imperial actors. The correspondence written by Chief Clarence, and other Mosquito leaders and headmen relating to the reservation’s incorporation, has generally been ignored and thus represents a hitherto untapped corpus of primary sources

Independent Scholar, UK

Corresponding author:

Luciano Baracco, Independent Scholar, York, UK.
Email: luciano68uk@gmail.com

which reveal glimpses of the Mosquito perspective on the incorporation. There are a number of caveats which should be noted relating to the use of this documentary evidence however. Those Mosquito whose views have been recorded in the diplomatic correspondence must necessarily have occupied positions which made them distinct from most Mosquito Indians living in isolated villages. The letters, petitions, and notes reviewed in this article form representations of the worldviews of a select number of Mosquito whose leadership status provided them the opportunity to engage in diplomatic correspondence. The unique status of the correspondents should not detract from the fact that the worldviews which they express were determined by the time, place, and milieu under which they were formed, suggesting that an analysis of the documents offers wider insights into the reservation era.

In his correspondence to the Foreign Office, the chief attempted to articulate the sense of injustice felt by the Mosquito people at the incorporation, often through a sophisticated understanding of treaty and international law. This image represents a stark contrast to the pejorative trope assigned to the Mosquito in the writings of the North American diplomat and explorer, E. G. Squires, of indolent drunken Indians, who were puppets of British imperialism entirely incapable of governing themselves (Olien, 1983).

Mosquito kingship

Mosquito kingship was first recorded by Europeans in the late 1600s. Kings appear to have been powerful chiefs who co-existed alongside other regional hereditary leaders, such as generals, admirals, and governors (Olien, 1983). Each leader governed their own regional fiefdom which collectively made up the territory of the Kingdom of Mosquitia. In 1687, a Mosquito leader referred to as Jeremy visited Jamaica and received a royal commission from the British governor recognizing his rank as king. The other regional leaders were subsequently granted similar royal commissions. Ties with the British were also strengthened by subsequent Mosquito kings sending their heirs to Britain, Belize, or Jamaica to be educated (Olien, 1983).

Helms (1986) described Mosquito kings as middlemen who mediated relations between Mosquito villages and British traders. Mosquito kings, governors, admirals, and generals represented mutually antagonistic “Big Men” (Helms, 1986, p. 510) who competed with each other for British patronage, while maintaining a significant degree of autonomy from the British. More recently, Mendiola (2019) has rejected the picture of the Kingdom of Mosquitia as a patchwork of mutually antagonistic leaders reliant on British trade. While the king did not reign over a state-like kingdom, he did occupy a position of *primus inter pares*. As Britain’s emissaries dealt primarily with the king, the king’s British connections allowed him to perform a mediating role among the other Mosquito leaders. This enabled the king to garner cooperation between regional leaders and pool their coercive resources to make the kingdom into a powerful and expansionary confederation in its own right (Mendiola, 2019).

With the security of British settlers in the Mosquitia guaranteed by the Mosquito, and Mosquito fighters helping to crush slave revolts in Jamaica during the 1720s (Olien, 1983), the British came to view the Mosquito as valuable military assets which could be used in their conflict with Spain during the War of American Independence (1775–1783). The Mosquito themselves were also keen to foster such an image, given the benefits it would bring in terms of access to British arms and war booty. Perceptions of the Mosquito as a “ready-made army of anti-Spanish indigenous warriors” underpinned the British military plans to occupy the San Juan River-Lake Nicaragua transit route in 1780 which linked the Pacific and Caribbean coasts of the isthmus (Dziennik, 2018, p. 165). However, with the subsequent failure of the San Juan expedition and the conclusion of the war, British images of the Mosquito were transformed. As imperial policy increasingly sought a withdrawal from British engagements south of Belize, the martial skills which formed such a pronounce feature in the imagery of Mosquito Indians faded, to be permanently replaced by depictions of vulnerable Indigenous people with no warlike characteristics (Dziennik, 2018). As the following discussion illustrates, this image was clearly retained by British diplomats during the late 19th-century, and played a critical role in legitimizing the decision to abandon support for Mosquito self-government at a time when Britain was seeking to extricate itself from Central America.

Being on the losing side of the War of American Independence, Britain ceded its control over the Mosquitia to Spain in the Treaty of Versailles 1787. Yet Spain failed to consolidate its rule over the region owing to increasingly fractious relations between Mosquito leaders which degenerated into a civil war in 1791 (Baracco, 2016). With the collapse of Spain’s Central American empire in 1821, the Mosquitia experienced a period of unprecedented autonomy until Britain returned to the region in 1844 and established a protectorate on the pretext of protecting the kingdom from the newly independent Central American republics (Gabbert, 2011). In reality, Britain had reluctantly accepted the need to protect the interests of the increasing number of British colonists in the Mosquitia involved in the mahogany trade (Olien, 1983). The king’s residence was transferred to the Creole (English speaking descendants of enslaved Africans) city of Bluefields, where a new governing Council of State was established. While Mosquito kingship formally continued, it was now a symbolic office presiding over a non-Indigenous governing council based on English laws and dominated by Afro-descendant Creoles, British colonists, and Moravian missionaries (Oertzen et al., 1990).

In 1847, in a preemptive move to block the proposed construction of an interoceanic canal under US control, Britain occupied the strategically important port of San Juan del Norte in the name of the Mosquito king. Using its possession of San Juan del Norte as leverage, Britain subsequently negotiated the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty 1850 with the USA which prohibited the construction of a canal under the exclusive control of either power, while

also prohibiting them from establishing protectorates or engaging in military interventions on the Central American isthmus.

The Mosquito Reservation (1860–1894)

As a consequence of these new treaty obligations, Britain signed the Treaty of Managua 1860 with Nicaragua which recognized Nicaraguan sovereignty over the Mosquitia while granting the Mosquito Indians self-government within the boundaries of a newly created Mosquito Reservation. The reservation was geographically smaller than the Kingdom of Mosquitia, as it excluded San Juan del Norte in the south, and the Wankie River area in the north where most of the Mosquito population lived. Its political status was also reduced to a municipal government. King George Augustus Fredrick's title was changed to Hereditary Chief, and all other non-kingly titles disappeared (Olien, 1983).

General and executive councils were appointed by a convention of Indian headmen which drew up a municipal constitution based on English laws. Both councils were presided over by Chief George, although his position remained largely symbolic. As the property and literacy qualifications for the executive council effectively prevented Indian participation, it came to be dominated by Afro-descendant Creoles, reflecting the general ascendance of Creoles during the British protectorate (Baracco, 2016).

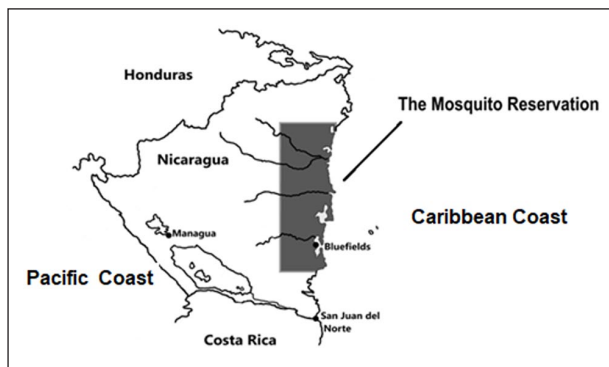


Figure 1. The Mosquito Reservation.

Mosquito = the largest Indigenous tribe in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America's Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica—who have been referred to as the Miskitu since the mid-20th century.

Nicaragua immediately rejected the legitimacy of the executive council because of the dominance of “Jamaican foreigners” (Oertzen et al., 1990, p. 60), and challenged the reservation's right to grant business concessions and levy import-export duties. Nicaragua also rejected the election of William Clarence as Hereditary Chief in 1866. As Chief William was only 10 years old, his duties would be carried out by a Creole guardian until he came of age. In an attempt to settle these disputes, and allay fears of a Nicaraguan invasion, Britain sought international arbitration by the Emperor of Austria. In 1881, the arbitration concluded that

the Mosquito Reservation had the right to exercise political and economic self-government. Nicaragua's sense of frustration at this diplomatic defeat was added to by the increasing prosperity of the reservation's foreign merchants based on the rapid growth in exports of bananas, rubber, lumber, and gold (Healy, 1981).

The incorporation of the Mosquito Reservation

In 1891, Robert Henry Clarence was elected Hereditary Chief with the unanimous backing of a convention of headmen assembled in Bluefields. Before his election, he had worked in a shop in Bluefields owned by a Creole businessman who had become his guardian after his father, Chief William, died. On his election, Chief Clarence moved into the house of the reservation's vice-president, a Creole named Charles Patterson, in Pearl City (FO, 1895). His English education at the Moravian Day School in Bluefields seems to have given him the edge over the two other candidates during the election convention (Taylor, 1891).

War with Honduras provided the pretext for Nicaragua to send troops to Bluefields in February 1894. Chief Clarence's protests to the British consul against troops being stationed in Bluefields were cynically used as an excuse for Nicaragua to order the occupation of all government buildings and the overthrow of the executive council. Nicaragua condemned Chief Clarence as a traitor who had sided with Honduras, and reminded him that in his rank as a chief he had no right to solicit British protection. Insisting that Nicaragua's rights to defend its sovereignty took precedence over the rights of a “semi barbarous tribe,” the executive council was denounced for having passed into the hands of a corrupt “negro oligarchy” in contravention of the Treaty of Managua (FO, 1894a, p. 112).

On February 25, HMS *Cleopatra* arrived under the command of Captain Assherton Curzon-Howe, with British consul Herbert Bingham also on board. They immediately rejected accusations of treason against Chief Clarence, suggesting it was simply an excuse for Nicaragua to incorporate the reservation (FO, 1894a). Nicaragua had attempted to achieve this some months before, by offering to make Chief Clarence a Brigadier-General in the Nicaraguan army and paying him a lifelong stipend in return for agreeing to incorporation. In response, the chief stated, “We have no power to give that away which does not belong to us” (FO, 1894a, p. 75).

Captain Curzon-Howe wrote disparagingly of Chief Clarence after their first meeting, describing him as “a young Indian of about 21 years of age, very ignorant and with very little will of own” (FO, 1894a, p. 13). Despite his low opinion of the chief, Curzon-Howe asked him to resume his position after numerous attempts to form a provisional government failed. The chief rejected the request on the grounds that he would be killed as soon as the *Cleopatra* left, prompting Curzon-Howe to inform the British Admiralty: “it would have been cruel and most unjust to have placed this amiable lad, the Chief, in the position of being murdered” (FO, 1894a, p. 35).



Figure 2. Front row: Lieutenant Reginald Colmore, British consul Herbert Bingham, Hereditary Chief Robert Henry Clarence (Photo by Pedro Pablo Ortega (1894), HMS Cleopatra logbook, © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, UK).

On 5 July, the uneasy peace prevailing in Bluefields was broken when Creole police officers demanding overdue wages were beaten by Nicaraguan soldiers. In response, Government House was attacked by an armed crowd, and two Nicaraguan soldiers were killed in a fire-fight nearby. With no authority in control of Bluefields, residents approached Chief Clarence to recall the executive council and restore order. The following day, Chief Clarence negotiated an agreement for Nicaraguan forces to leave Bluefields (FO, 1894b).

Nicaragua's response to this humiliating withdrawal was delayed owing to the threat of rebellions in other parts of the country which events in Bluefields had raised. During this interregnum, the chief sent correspondence to the Nicaraguan government explaining that he had played no part in the July disturbances, and was simply carrying out his lawful duty under the terms of the Treaty of Managua which remained in force:

As the Chief of the Mosquito Indians and President of the Council within the Mosquito Reservation you may be informed that I have faithfully lived up to the stipulations of the Treaty of Managua and the Award of the Emperor of Austria, and with high respect for both Contracting Powers, have without force or violence maintained my honour and the honour of my people by honouring the sovereignty of Nicaragua . . . I am happy to inform you that the unfortunate occurrence so unhappily brought about by yourself and others on the 5th and the 6th of July, which left this city helpless in its administration and detrimental to the moral, social, agricultural, and commercial interests of the peaceable inhabitants of this city and the Reservation, is now legally and constitutionally guarded and watched over. (FO, 1894b, pp. 44–45)

Despite the chief's claims to be fulfilling his constitutional duty, Nicaraguan forces occupied Bluefields on 3 August. With Nicaragua in full military control of Bluefields, Chief Clarence sought refuge on the British warship, HMS

Cleopatra, which took him to Puerto Limón in Costa Rica. Two weeks later, the chief arrived in Port Royal, Jamaica (FO, 1894b).

On November 20, 1894, a Mosquito convention took place in Bluefields where Indian headmen signed a decree of incorporation, transforming the Mosquito Reservation into the Department of Zelaya (FO, 1895). Diplomatic correspondence questioned the voluntary nature of the Indians' consent for their incorporation. The British vice-consul in Bluefields reported that many headmen were from villages outside the reservation, while others were young boys who could not have been headmen. He learned that most of the delegates did not speak Spanish or English, and were illiterate, making it highly unlikely they were capable of giving their informed consent (FO, 1895).

Jamaican exile

On arrival in Jamaica, Chief Clarence and his secretary, Charles Cuthbert, were accommodated in the Saint Andrew's neighbourhood of Kingston, and granted a daily allowance of UK £3 and 10s (FO, 1894b) by the Governor of Jamaica. The chief engaged in extensive correspondence with the British Foreign and Colonial offices about the restoration of the Mosquito Reservation. In a letter dated the January 21, 1895, to the British Foreign Secretary, the Earl of Kimberley, the chief angrily denied Nicaragua's accusation that the occupation of the reservation had been provoked by any act of rebellion on his part (FO, 1895). Challenging such accusations, he attributed the July disturbances in Bluefields to the actions of Nicaragua's political and military representatives who had

invaded the Mosquito Reservation on the 12th February 1894, and by an affray with their own provisional policemen caused the peaceable and law abiding inhabitants to call on me to reassume my Government in order to protect life and property and restore law and order. (FO, 1895, p. 80)

After an initial flurry of communications, Chief Clarence appears to have stopped corresponding with the British government. British Foreign Office files on the Mosquito Coast between 1895 and 1900 contain very few letters from the chief or any other Mosquito leader. However, when Nicaragua introduced a comprehensive increase in all taxes in the former reservation in 1900, resentment escalated into an unsuccessful rebellion led by the Nicaraguan governor which was supported by foreign merchants and Indians.

An exponential increase in Mosquito correspondence followed these events, accompanied by the clandestine departure of three Mosquito Delegates to Jamaica, to consult with Chief Clarence. With the help of a Moravian pastor who had worked in the Mosquitia, the delegates, George Cuthbert, Leno Nelson, and Sam Pitts, found accommodation in the Rae Town district of Kingston. Jamaica's Colonial Secretary, Sidney Olivier, described George Cuthbert as a "Jamaican Indian half-breed," and Leno Nelson and Sam Pitts as Mosquito Indians: "Nelson seemed a respectable capable man, speaking some English; Pitts spoke no English, but took a leading part in the

conversation. He appeared to me to be a man of decided character, quiet, sensible, and appreciative of inquiry" (FO, 1900, p. 25). The delegates relayed complaints concerning Nicaragua's breaches of the Treaty of Managua, the closing of Moravian schools on account of the prohibition on educational instruction in English, the sale of Indian lands, and excessive taxes. They also enquired about Britain's intentions towards the Mosquito Reservation, stating they had followed the advice from the captain of HMS Mohawk to "keep quiet until a constitutional Government should be settled for their province" (FO, 1900, p. 25). As they informed Olivier that their departure from the reservation and their petitioning of the British government put their lives in danger, they asked for British protection on their return to their homeland as they feared they would be killed. While Olivier suggested these fears seemed

"a well-informed expectation," he informed them that: "Great Britain could and would give them no protection, and would not interfere on their behalf with the Government of Nicaragua, being bound by her Treaties with the United States not to do so." (FO, 1900, p. 26)

In March 1902, Chief Clarence was informed that the British government was engaged in treaty negotiations which would recognize Nicaragua's incorporation of the reservation. Responding to the news, the chief wrote to the Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, protesting against any treaty which legitimized Nicaragua's actions, and questioned the legality of such negotiations given that the Treaty of Managua required the voluntary consent of the Mosquito Indians for any change in the reservation's status:

This incorporation has not been and never will be desired by the Mosquito Indians, and, therefore, I question the right or legality of any Treaty which in any way varies from the provisions of this particular paragraph of Managua . . . We do not, and never will, recognise Nicaraguan rule. The Treaty of Managua disallows such rule, and therefore, by all that is righteous and just, I request that you now take immediate steps to have this question settled. The delegates and myself must not be treated in a manner that would cause us to feel that it is understood or felt that we do not rightly know what we are about, or to cause us to lose confidence in the assistance pledged by the British Government as a nation to us; and as often as we hear from Mosquito the Indians say: "Press our cause; we are waiting on England to restore us our country." (FO, 1902, p. 29)

By 1903, petitions by the Mosquito Delegates began to include appeals to the colonial government for financial assistance, and also showed the first signs of what was to become a very public split with Chief Clarence. Although the documentary evidence shows that Chief Clarence continued to petition the British over Mosquito restoration, the delegates accused him of abandoning the Mosquito cause. Detailing their own situation of financial penury, they accuse the chief of being content to remain in Jamaica given the "substantial pension" he received from the Colonial Office (FO, 1903, p. 6). The split between the

chief and the delegates was aggravated when he dismissed his secretary, Charles Cuthbert.

The delegates' criticisms seemed to be confirmed when an editorial in the Kingston newspaper, *The Daily Gleaner*, reported that the chief's continued receipt of his allowance was conditional on him not "embarrassing British policy" ("Great Britain and the Mosquito Indians", 1902, p. 4) by returning to the reservation to agitate for restoration. The editorial suggests the delegates should consider electing another chief, as "it must be evident to them that he [Chief Clarence] is not likely to become the liberator of his country" ("Great Britain and the Mosquito Indians", 1902, p. 4). Replying to the editorial, Chief Clarence denied any conditions had been placed on the receipt of his allowance, and rejected the editor's attempts to distract his and the delegates' attention from their common cause by encouraging them to elect another chief:

It does not rest with the delegates to elect a Chief. I, and I alone, am the hereditary Chief of the Mosquito Indians, and my people know I am their heart and soul, their aspirations are my aspirations, their afflictions are my afflictions, and if the Foreign Office has been moving slowly in redressing our wrongs the GLEANER and its wire pullers, can never on that account alienate the affections and loyalty of my people. (Clarence, 1902, p. 18)

Despite Chief Clarence's public statement denying he had abandoned the restoration cause for financial gain, the delegates repeated their accusations in their correspondence to the Foreign Office, which also implicated both the chief's wife and his lawyer:

When Mr. Charles Cuthbert made it his absolute duty to urge Mr. Clarence to press for the restoration of Mosquito, it was that which resulted in their separation. After Mr. Cuthbert was discharged, he subsequently employed one Lionel L. Samuels, a solicitor, through the influence of his wife, who is a Jamaican, and whose intentions were so adverse to Mosquito, as she got to know that her status would not be recognized there, as the marriage was contrary to the Indian's law, as she is not an Indian; and as her children could not be heirs to the Mosquito Chieftainship she advised his stay in Jamaica on the pension which he is now receiving. This solicitor, Samuels, is a Jew, is a native of Jamaica, and has been receiving for some considerable time a salary from the British Exchequer of 12£. per month, and it is only natural that he will use every means in his power to make things remain as they are in their present chaotic state so that he retains his pay. (FO, 1905, p. 72)

Not all the correspondence in the FO files relating to Chief Clarence addresses the Mosquito question. A number of letters disclose glimpses of his personal life and circumstances. In 1899, Chief Clarence married a Jamaican woman called Irene Morris. The couple had two children; Edna Maude Clarence (1901–1963) and Herbert Harrington Henry Clarence (1906–1966). As their mother was not Indigenous, neither child could hold any hereditary title. Although the Colonial Office had provided Chief Clarence with an allowance, his appeals to the Governor of Jamaica for an increase in the amount paid shows that

he had become indebted. On April 21, 1903, Colonial Secretary for Jamaica, Sidney Olivier, received a letter from Irene Clarence, stating that her husband had left home and had stopped providing financial support for her and their daughter. The chief's debts totalled some hundreds of pounds sterling, and as she reports that bailiffs had visited her over mortgage arrears, she appealed to Olivier for assistance:

I humbly and respectfully solicit the intervention of the local Government, which I assume has some control over the Chief, for my protection, so that I may be paid half of his allowance to support myself and child in a manner befitting the Chief's station and our own. (FO, 1903, pp. 14–15)

When contacted about the matter, Chief Clarence explained to Olivier that he had left his marital home because his mother-in-law was cohabiting with them, and blamed his debts on increasing costs after he had married and his own financial naivety which led to "many persons of unscrupulous proclivities" taking advantage of him (FO, 1903, p. 15). Concerned about his spending, Olivier briefly placed the chief under police surveillance. One police report, dated the April 4, 1903, noted that the chief had taken up residence at the Myrtle Bank Hotel and described him as a "quiet, harmless individual" who was so heavily in debt that he was "obliged some weeks ago to pawn some of his clothes" (FO, 1903, p. 15). The report goes on to say:

He leads a moral life but frequents taverns, where he spends a good deal of money, not on himself, as he is not a hard drinker (Gilbey's sherry at 1s. a pint being his favourite tippie—the consequence is, he suffers a good deal from liver). His money goes on a number of loafers with whom he associates, and on whom he spends money for drinks. (FO, 1903, pp. 16–17)

The Harrison-Altamirano Treaty 1905

In 1904, British Charges d'Affairs for Central America, Herbert Harrison, wrote an extended letter to the British Foreign Secretary concerning Anglo-Nicaraguan negotiations to replace the Treaty of Managua. The letter sets out his objections to Mosquito self-government, and provides the most detailed exposition of British colonialist views on the Mosquito people from among the FO correspondence. It should also be acknowledged that the letter was written in the context of Britain having no interest in staging any intervention that would create friction with the USA which was now the dominant imperial power in Central America:

There can be no doubt whatever that the Mosquito Indians are in every way entirely incapable of managing their own or any other people's affairs, if brought into contact with the outside world. In former times they were the puppets of any merchant who wished to make use of them, and they were always willing and anxious to barter anything they had for drink. There is little difference in them to-day. The marks of many of their principal Headmen are on the documents demanding the incorporation of their Reserve in 1894, and

whatever means were employed to obtain their marks then, can be employed again to-day to obtain their consent to anything that is requested.

The Mosquito Indians are timid and cowardly in character and they are excessively lazy and incapable of effort. They are, therefore, useless for hard work or for soldiers, and cannot be intrusted with the least responsibility.

If, therefore, between Nicaraguans and traders, the Mosquito Indians have little prospect of being allowed to continue to live the life of savages as their ancestors did, it appears to me that under the rule of their countrymen [Nicaraguans], they can at least be sure that the changes they dread will arrive less rapidly. (FO, 1904, pp. 59–60)

Echoing the imagery of the Mosquito among British diplomats which emerged during the late 18th century, Harrison's letter expresses views which undermined any notion of Mosquito self-government so as to provide the justification for Britain to abandon the last remnants of its responsibilities towards the Mosquito and achieve the foreign policy objective of a definitive withdrawal from Central America. Initiating clandestine treaty negotiations with Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Adolfo Altamirano, Britain agreed to acknowledge Nicaragua's full sovereignty over the territory of the former reservation, yet sought a number of concessions for the Mosquito, such as village-level autonomy, exemptions from military service and taxation, and a one-off payment to Chief Clarence of UK £4000 on his return to Bluefields (FO, 1904). After reviewing the draft treaty, Nicaragua rejected any concessions as curtailments of its sovereignty that would maintain the Mosquito in their present state as "savage Indian tribes" (FO, 1904, p. 36).

In April 1905, the FO sent the chief a final copy of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty, informing him that it had been ratified by both Britain and Nicaragua, and would come into force in 1906. In a letter to the Foreign Secretary, the Marquess of Lansdowne, dated June 7, 1905, Chief Clarence complained that the Indians had been willing to fight Nicaragua's occupation of Bluefields in February 1894, but disarmed after guarantees that

Great Britain would protect them if they laid down their arms, and how, after all their arms and ammunition were collected and taken on board Her Majesty's ship "Cleopatra," they were left defenceless, but with the promise of protection from Her Majesty's Government, and which protection they sought under their Treaty rights with Great Britain. (FO, 1905, p. 87)

Chief Clarence also condemned Britain's departure from the usual "diplomatic etiquette" by negotiating a treaty without consulting him as the acknowledged head of the Mosquito Reservation, openly stating his sense of betrayal:

His Majesty's Government should see fit to send a man-of-war to take me away from my country, keep me in enforced exile under a promise of protection, and then hand over my country to its oppressors without reference to me and regardless of my destiny. (FO, 1905, p. 87)

As the full ratification of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty approached, the FO made plans to cancel Chief Clarence's allowance in expectation that he would return to Bluefields. Article IV of the treaty permitted the chief "to reside in the Republic of Nicaragua so long as he does not transgress the laws or incite the Indians against Nicaragua" (FO, 1905, pp. 109–110), and a promissory note was submitted committing Nicaragua to make a one off payment of UK £4000 for the chief's maintenance. Chief Clarence did not share the Foreign Office's confidence in Nicaraguan assurances over his safety if he returned to Bluefields. Furthermore, accepting any kind of payment from Nicaragua, even if it was via the Colonial Office, could be seen as an endorsement of the new treaty:

I desire again to guard myself as Chief of the Mosquito Indians against any participation in the surrender to Nicaragua of their independence, which I have neither the power nor desire to impair. My views on this point are already on record at the Foreign Office, London, and in discussing the financial question as I have done, I do so on the invitation of the Imperial Government through your Excellency, and without disloyalty to my country, my people, or myself. (FO, 1906, p. 18)

In a letter to the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, dated May 23, 1906, Chief Clarence informed him of his intention to remain in Jamaica and, in a rare expression of anger, directly accused Britain of trading the interests of the Mosquito in return for Nicaragua granting fishing rights off the Mosquito Coast to British subjects living on the Cayman Islands:

I cannot, it is absolutely impossible for me to, live under the Nicaraguan rule, and, as I pointed out in a previous communication, I would distinctly be "between two fires." I would, without the slightest provocation or justification, be assassinated by the Nicaraguans first, and my accusation and trial would come after; and if this did not happen, my own people would accuse me of having sold them and my country . . . Indeed, it appears to me that the condition now imposed that I should return to the reservation in the position and on the terms stated seems designed and recommended to His Majesty's Government with the sinister intention of ridding all parties of a troublesome matter, in a manner speedy and effective, if primitive and violent.

It is becoming apparent to me that the Nicaraguan Government, in order to secure a rich territory, are willing to pay 4,000l. for it, and His Majesty's Government, under whose protection my country and person were placed by Treaty rights, in order to secure advantage for British subjects of the Cayman Islands (a dependency of Jamaica), who fish for turtle off the coast of the Reserve, are willing that the sale shall take place.

I most respectfully state that, on my own and my countries behalf, I cannot consent to such a sale nor accept 4,000l., and I desire here again to enter my emphatic protest. (FO, 1906, pp. 22A–22B)

In reply to the Chief's protests, the Foreign and Colonial offices made it clear that they had every confidence in

Nicaraguan guarantees over his safety, and that his allowance would end with the full ratification of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty (FO, 1906). After that date, the chief would be given an annuity of UK £400 by the Foreign Office, which would be derived from earnings on the investment of the UK £4000 Nicaragua had agreed to pay. The FO also accepted that, as the chief had refused to return to Nicaragua, his properties in the former reservation would be forfeited. In December 1906, Nicaragua paid the FO the agreed amount (FO, 1906). At this point, the chief appears to have accepted his permanent exile in Jamaica. From 1906, the diminishing correspondence sent by Chief Clarence to the Foreign and Colonial Offices relate exclusively to his income.

In a final attempt to persuade the British government to revoke the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty, one of the Mosquito Delegates, Sam Pitts, visited London in July 1907 to speak with Sir Edward Grey ("Mission Fails," 1907). There is no record of a meeting between the two in the FO files, although one short note confirms that officials did have some contact with two Mosquito Indians around that time and had persuaded the Treasury to pay their fare back to Jamaica (FO, 1907). Soon after returning to Jamaica, Pitts travelled to Nicaragua and was killed during a short-lived armed rebellion (Rossback, 1985). Less than 1 month later Chief Clarence died from a heart attack during a minor operation at the Public Hospital in Kingston. The death certificate, which did not use his title of chief, states cause of death as "administering of chloroform. Predisposing causes fatty degeneration of the heart" ("Robert Henry Clarence," 1908). For his occupation it simply says "Nil" ("Robert Henry Clarence," 1908). During the coroner's hearing, the doctor treating him said the chief reacted so violently to the attempt to sedate him with chloroform because he was an alcoholic. The chief seems to have had a reconciliation with his wife, as she testified to the hearing that she visited him daily and was at the hospital when he died ("The death of Chief Clarence", 1908). He is buried in May Pen cemetery, Kingston (St Andrew Parish Church-Kingston, personal communication, 25 July, 2023).

Conclusion

This article represents a rare attempt to shine a light on the reaction of the Mosquito people to the forced incorporation of their reservation through a review of diplomatic correspondence written by a select group of Mosquito leaders. Through re-inscribing Chief Clarence and other Mosquito leaders into the historical narrative of the period, this article illuminates a stark disparity between well-established and wholly negative colonialist views on the Mosquito, and the reality of a well-informed Mosquito leadership capable of articulating a sophisticated defence of Mosquito rights under treaty law. The exposure of this disparity confirms observations from earlier studies concerning the link between changes in Britain's imperial policy and the transformation of the Mosquito in the ideological horizons of British diplomats.

The disclosure of the contents of various documents written by Chief Clarence has produced the beginnings of a counter narrative to the pejorative portrayals of the Mosquito by imperial actor. These colonialist portrayals clearly continue to exert a lingering influence on contemporary histories of the reservation, creating a lens through which Mosquito responses to the incorporation have been obscured and silenced. Whatever the acknowledged limitations of the use of such documents, they nevertheless hold the potential to re-inscribe the Mosquito people into the dynamics of the reservation era much more on their own terms, adding to our understanding of the incorporation's impact on the reservation's Indigenous inhabitants. While much has been written concerning British, North American, and Nicaraguan views on the incorporation, the perspective of the Mosquito has yet to be written. Given the wealth and extent of material which exists in the FO files written by Chief Clarence, the Mosquito Delegates, and village headmen, this enterprise holds great potential, and remains a work in progress.

Author's note

Luciano Baracco has written extensively on the social and political history of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua.

Acknowledgements

I thank Jane Freeland and Nigel Grieves for their advice on an early draft of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Luciano Baracco  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6952-5609>

Glossary

Creole	English speaking descendants of enslaved Africans
Garifuna	an Afro-Indigenous group with origins on the island of St. Lucia
Mayangna	an Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America's Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica; formerly known as Sumos
Mosquito	the largest Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America's Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica—who have been referred to as the Miskitu since the mid-20th century
Rama	the smallest Indigenous tribe living in Mosquitia—an historical territory on Central America's Caribbean Coast, stretching from Honduras to the northern parts of Costa Rica

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